CHAPTER 2

Sportsmanship and the Nature of Sport

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Neither are the two arts of music and gymnastic really designed, as is often supposed, the one for the training of the soul, the other for the training of the body.

What then is the real object of them?

I believe, I said, that the teachers of both have in view chiefly the improvement of the soul.

—Plato, *Republic (Jowett translation)*

The true athlete should have good character, not be a character.

—John Wooden

In this chapter, we want you to think hard about the very nature of the activity in which you are involved. Perhaps you've never asked yourself, in an explicit way, the most basic question: What is sport? But as we have already suggested, there's little doubt that your approach to coaching probably assumes some answer to this question. In this chapter we'll ask you to make your assumptions explicit—and to examine them. We'll ask you to think explicitly about the nature of sport. At various points, we'll stop and imagine how some coaches might respond to what we're saying. So imagine that you're engaged in a conversation with us. At other times, we'll take a brief time-out to enable you to reflect on the issue that we're raising.

WHY SPORTSMANSHIP?

Why sportsmanship? Actually, as Kareem's remarks in chapter 1 reminded us, the first question is: Why sport? It's impossible to say why sportsmanship is important—or even what it is—without some understanding of what sport is all about. Why do we play these games? Why do we encourage our children to play them? Why do we include sports in our schools?

Some educators have questioned the value of the competitive experience in an educational setting, on the playing field as well as in the classroom, while others insist that participation in sports is a valuable experience, even a necessary educational experience. Detractors say the competitive situation is debilitating, that it instills bad

character traits, that "cooperative learning" ought to displace competitive learning; defenders say that "sport builds character," that competition provides a unique opportunity for learning.

Some of these disagreements run deep, and they ultimately have to do with profoundly different views of what life is all about; but on both sides there's a good deal of confusion about the *nature* of the activity. Why sportsmanship? Why sport? How we answer those questions depends on how we answer another question: What is sport? In other words, what is the *nature* of sport?

Of course, this question has generated volumes of learned reflection by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers. We certainly can't fully address this question here, but it is possible to offer a brief sketch of an answer.

Coach Skeptical: Come on, guys, the "nature" of sport? We all know what sport is. The only question is how to be good at it.

We all operate with some idea—well, it might be an assumption—about the nature of sport. We're saying that it's something we need to consciously think about.

Coach Skeptical: I need to think about how to get my players motivated to win. Thinking about the nature of sport isn't going to help me do that.

Suppose you think that sport is something we do to escape from the drudgery of work—a kind of pleasant release from the things that really matter. That it's "fun." It's "play." And that its purpose is to help us relax so that we can go back to work, which is what really matters, refreshed. Wouldn't that have an effect on how you would treat your players? Run a practice? Coach a game?

Or say you think that sport is an arena for the strong to triumph over the weak, winners over losers. That it's about winning, and only about winning. Would that view of the nature of sport have an effect on the way you approached coaching?

Of course it would. That's why we're asking you to take a step back from the day-to-day pressures of running a practice, preparing for the arch rival, dealing with irate parents, and talking to the local radio sportscaster. We're asking you to think about what sort of activity you're involved in, because the ideas and assumptions that you carry into coaching have a profound effect on the young people you coach.

THE NATURE OF SPORT

The language we use to talk about sport is revealing. We "play the game," "play ball," "make the play." We call the participants "players." *Sport is a form of play*. Inherent in the idea of play is that, unlike work, we don't have to do it. We freely choose to play. And it's important to note that we freely choose to play, not because playing results in something else that is valuable (although it may), but because we enjoy playing. We play because it's fun, exhilarating, beautiful. In philosophical terms, we play because we find the activity of playing *inherently valuable*. That's why the anthropologist Johan Huizinga refers to the human species as *homo ludens*, "playing man." Far from being a mere escape from "real life," play is a part of who we are.

Of course, there are other forms of play that aren't sport. Kids horsing around on a jungle gym or simply running around the neighborhood burning up energy is play, but it isn't sport. When parents say to a child "Go outside and play," they aren't usually thinking about sport. What, then, distinguishes sport from other forms of play? While sport is still play, there is an element of seriousness about it. Although we sometimes use the term "sport" to refer to noncompetitive physical activities such as fishing or horseback riding for pleasure, in the context of school or club athletics, sport takes on this air of seriousness because it involves competition—and because this competition is governed by rules and customs. The rules spell out the nature of the competition, and they establish the boundaries of fairness within which winning is meaningful. But competition does involve winning and losing. Players "play" the game, but they pit their skills and abilities against the skills of opponents, and even against other participants, past, present, and future. Within the context of the game, one player is *better* than another; one team is *better* than another. Because the kind of sport we're concerned with here is competitive, better and worse matter. It's play, but it's serious; it's fun, but it's difficult; it can be exhilarating, but it can be heartbreaking.

Sport, then, is a form of play, a competitive, rule-governed activity that human beings freely choose to engage in. Understanding this, we must play it as if it is absolutely important while never forgetting that it's a form of play that, in a certain sense, doesn't really matter. Ultimately, the principles of sportsmanship are based on the delicate balance of playfulness and seriousness that is at the heart of sport.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Which do you emphasize more: the seriousness or the playfulness of competition? If you think in terms of a scale from total playfulness to total seriousness, where do you place yourself on the scale?
- What do you say in practice or during and after a game to remind your players that sport is a form of play? What are some of the common expressions that draw attention to the playful character of sport?
- What do you say to draw attention to the serious side of sport? To its competitive nature? What are some of the common expressions that draw attention to the seriousness of competition?
- Suppose your team has just lost a well-fought game against a superior opponent. How often do you do the following:
  - –Say something like "It's only a game" or "Your mother will still love you"?
  - –Blow up and tell them they didn't "want it bad enough"?
  - –Commend them for their play and their behavior?
  - –Commend the opponents for their play and behavior?
  - –Punish the team for losing (with an extra practice, extra running, or the like)?

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON COMPETITION: FINDING THE MIDDLE WAY

When we forget the balance of playfulness and seriousness, sportsmanship falls by the wayside. Two extreme views of competition are based on a confusion about the balance of playfulness and seriousness in sport. Our intention is to offer a middle way that preserves this essential balance.

At one extreme is the view that winning is everything and the only thing, that nothing is ever gained in losing, except learning that losing is bad. Competition on this model is like war: The opponent is the enemy and the goal is to destroy the enemy. At the other extreme is the view that competition is inherently bad, that all forms of play in which there are winners and losers are unethical, psychologically destructive, educationally ineffective. On this view, only noncompetitive play is acceptable. Sports are acceptable only if they are organized,

coached, and taught in such a way that winning—and therefore talent and ability—doesn't matter at all. On this view, "having fun" is the only thing that matters.

The winning-is-everything approach loses track of the spirit of play; the fun-is-everything approach loses track of the seriousness. To the one, we ought to say "Lighten up" and to the other, "Get serious." From the standpoint of the middle ground on which sport is both playful and serious, both of these extremes are based on the same misunderstanding of the nature of competition.

On one level, competition does involve winners and losers; and, more specifically, if one side wins, the other necessarily loses. But on another level, competition is an opportunity for the development, exercise, and expression of human excellence. Trying to win means trying to do the best I can at the game, trying to be as excellent as possible in all of the ways that the game calls for. But it is precisely my opponent's effort to excel, my opponent's effort to perform better than I do, that gives me the opportunity to strive for excellence. By the same token, I make it possible for my opponent to strive for excellence. In that sense I ought to be thankful for a great opponent. On one level opponents "oppose" each other; on another level they are engaged in a *mutual striving for excellence*.[1] If it's valuable to play, then my opponent is valuable to me; without an opponent I can't play. On the playing field, "cooperative" and "competitive" learning are not opposites, for good competition is cooperation.

Of course, it's little wonder that some people would conclude that competition is inherently bad if their competitive experiences have been characterized by the winning-is-everything attitude. If winning is everything and you're better than I am, then what's the point? If I'm going to lose, it's pretty obvious that my only rational choice is to refuse to compete. Or, if I am better than you and you will get nothing from losing to me, then my beating you is nothing short of exploitation. Both of those situations would be morally repugnant.

At the other extreme, if you teach kids that winning doesn't matter at all, you're not being honest about the nature of competition. If it doesn't matter at all whether I win or lose, if it doesn't matter at all whether I throw the ball well or poorly, what's the point? If the winning-is-everything extreme is morally repugnant, the winning-is-nothing extreme is morally inane. A beginning youth league might well employ a rule that all players play a certain number of minutes to allow all of the participants an opportunity to learn the skills of the

[1]We take the phrase "mutual striving" from Drew Hyland, "Competition and Friendship," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* V (1978). Hyland points out that the word "competition" derives from the Latin *com-petitio,* meaning "to question or strive together."

game, but such a rule employed to downplay the competitive aspect of the game misses the point of competition.

To steer a course between these extremes, we have to articulate the value of *participating* in the game and the opportunity that that participation affords. At the risk of combating clichés with clichés, we do need to return to the notion that, at some deeper level, it's not whether you win or lose—after all, somebody must lose for somebody else to win—but how you play the game. In fact, we can take this idea one step further: It's not just how *you* play the game that ultimately matters, but how the *game* is played, for it is participation in that game that is valuable. How I play the game contributes to the quality of that game for me, my teammates, coach, and opponents—even spectators and the community.

It's not whether you win or lose, but what kind of game everyone gets to participate in. Central to the game is the effort of the participants to win, and without the participants' commitment to winning, there is no game. It is not, however, the winning itself that ultimately matters, but the sorts of things we experience and come to understand by playing the game and the opportunities for human excellence that playing the game affords.

Coach Skeptical: But if you tell your players that winning isn't everything, will they try as hard to win? Will it matter enough to them? I want my players to be as competitive as they can be. I want them to hurt like I do when they lose. Isn't it still winning that really matters?

Don't misunderstand what we're saying. We believe that winning really matters—and that it should matter. But it matters within the context of participating in an exhilarating experience of trying to become excellent, and learning things about ourselves. The main problem with the winning-is-everything attitude is that it diminishes the importance of all the other good things about sport. It's like going to a good movie and saying the only good thing about it was how it turned out. An understanding of the richness of sport helps us sustain the balance of playfulness and seriousness, and this very balance provides space for other important values—including sportsmanship—to flourish. In fact, what we're saying is that competitiveness—striving to win—is an essential part of sportsmanship.

SPORT AND VIRTUE

One of the assumptions we make in this book is that coaches—and, for that matter, administrators, parents, fans, officials, and everyone else

involved in youth athletics—are moral educators, whether they want to be or not. That does not mean that they are moral indoctrinators—indeed, they should not indoctrinate. It does mean, however, that, inescapably, they play a role in the formation of character.

For this reason, it is important to understand that sportsmanship is not just a matter of acceptable behavior but of *excellence of character*—or, in the language of the classical tradition—*sportsmanship is a virtue*. It is not altogether coincidental that there has been a return to the classical understanding of virtue right at a time when so many of our athletic superstars in professional and big-time college sports have become models of anything and everything but good character. It is particularly sad, because sport has long provided an arena in which the central ethical concept has been excellence of character. Part of the purpose of this book is to reclaim the moral language that was—and to a large extent still is—part of the great athletic traditions harkening all the way back to the Olympian ideals that we continue to celebrate every four years as well as the language of classical ethical thought that harkens all the way back to ancient Greek philosophy.

There are some pitfalls to this language. The English word "virtue," in certain contexts, has the connotation of moral purity, of having avoided the stain of vice. In that context, one is virtuous by *not* doing something. We mean by "virtue" not moral purity but *excellence of character*.[2] When we speak of a return to a "virtue-centered ethics," we have in mind the turn from ethics centered on principles and rules for right action and good conduct to ethics centered on the importance of good character. Sportsmanship, then, is not just about following rules, behaving a certain way because that's the way you're supposed to behave; it's about what sort of human beings we choose to become. When William Bennett, former Secretary of Education, put out *The Book of Virtues* in 1993, a good part of what he had in mind was the classical notion of virtue as excellence of character. His notion is that stories can provide models of excellent character. Our notion—and, of course, it's not our notion, but a very old one—is that athletic competition can provide an arena for the *practice* of virtue, that is, for development of excellent character.

Because virtue is at least in part a matter of deeply ingrained habits, it makes sense to say that a person can practice virtue. If I lack self-discipline, I need opportunities—not overwhelmingly difficult ones to begin with—to develop the habit of self-discipline. If I lack courage and self-confidence, I need the opportunity to develop courage and

[2]Both "virtue" and "excellence" have been used as translations of the classical Greek *aretē*, the central concept in Plato's and Aristotle's ethical thought.

self-confidence. Likewise, if sportsmanship is a virtue, it makes sense to say that one can practice sportsmanship. It is essential to recognize that all the principles or rules for behavior that we'll articulate in the following chapters are grounded in the notion that they develop excellence of character.

There may be a good deal of disagreement about exactly how to flesh out the content of an excellent character. It would be impossible here to attempt to list and think through even the most historically important recommendations concerning the central human virtues: wisdom, courage, self-control, justice, honesty, autonomy, humility, benevolence, love, authenticity, compassion, responsibility, respectfulness . . . the list would be quite long. What is clear, though, is that sport requires and shapes character traits. It's not by any means the only arena—so is the classroom, the music practice room, and, in most households, the room with the biggest TV set—but it's an important one. How you set up a practice, talk about the game, respond to discipline problems—everything you do—sets the tone, takes a stand on what sort of character traits you value. How you respond to a lazy player who merely goes through the motions of a strenuous drill, a player's taunting of an opponent, a player of mediocre talent whose effort was superb—all of these responses tell young athletes what kind of character you value, what sort of human beings they should aspire to be. In short, we're better off to admit that we are moral educators, try to think as clearly about these difficult issues as we can, and develop our athletic programs accordingly. Coaches don't simply stamp out human character like, say, automobiles in a factory. In fact, one of the things we have to remember is that coaches have to make good judgments, not only about the abilities and limits of athletic ability but also about the natural dispositions and limitations of character. But coaches do provide an opportunity for the practice of virtue.

In fleshing out the virtue of sportsmanship, you'll come to see that practicing sportsmanship means practicing an attitude of respect. Respect is an attitude of positive evaluation, a recognition of something, some reality that merits understanding and attentiveness. To respect something is to value it and treat it as worthy in its own right. To respect something I have to overcome my inclination to be selfish, my inclination to see the thing only in terms of my own needs and interests. To respect my parents or to respect my country, for example, is to esteem or to honor something outside myself, and to realize that there are right and wrong ways to act in relation to these independent realities.

To be a good sport I must understand my situation and see things broadly, not simply in terms of self-centered desires to win, to be

famous, or to be mentioned in the headlines of the local newspaper. As a player or participant I should respect opponents, teammates, officials, the coach, and, in the broadest sense, the very activity in which I am engaged. It is important to remember, however, that we are talking not simply about rules for behavior, but about the *habit of respect*—a habit of respect that becomes a part of someone's character.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- How often do the following words or expressions come out of your mouth?

  –Character
  –Integrity
  –Class, class act
  –Dignity
  –Respect
  –Sportsmanship
  –Honor
  –Humility

- The list of cardinal virtues for classical Greek civilization included wisdom, self-control, courage, and justice. What kinds of situations call for these cardinal virtues?

- Come up with your own list of virtues. If you believe that sport builds character, what are the character traits, the virtues, that you think sport builds?

- Put into your own words what it means to have an attitude of respect. Do you think that young people today are less inclined to exhibit this attitude? If so, why has this come about?

SPORT, GOOD JUDGMENT, AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING

As a moral educator you have to make good judgments yourself; but it bears mentioning that you are also providing the arena in which your players can develop good judgment. We may be able to say in a

general way what sportsmanship is—and you may be able to explain it to your players—but that doesn't mean we can tell you exactly what the sportsmanlike thing to do will be in every particular situation. And you will not be able to tell your players in every situation how to apply these principles. The practice and development of good character, as well as its exercise, requires good judgment. As we articulate the principles of good sportsmanship in the chapters that follow, the first thing that will come to mind for anyone with athletic experience is that it's often difficult to determine in a particular situation what is the appropriate way to exercise respect for opponents (chapter 3), respect for teammates (chapter 4), respect for officials (chapter 5), respect for the game (chapter 6), or respect between players and coaches (chapter 7). If an opponent repeatedly demonstrates disrespect for me and for the game, for example, how do I respond in such a way as to demonstrate that I understand my need for a good opponent and my respect for the game? We will provide examples of difficult situations, and we encourage you to think them through, discuss them, and try to figure out how to respond in light of the principles of sportsmanship that we articulate here. We hasten to point out that the difficulty that some situations present for the realization of these principles doesn't mean that the principles are invalid. Many situations and many actions and responses by athletes are clear as day, and we'll provide examples of that nature as well. In that sense, good stories about heroes and villains are essential. Indeed, the fact that decisions in light of principles are sometimes difficult doesn't mean that we should abandon principles. It is precisely when the situations are difficult that we need to stress deliberation in light of principles.

One of the dangers of a simplistic approach to the idea that sport builds character is that we can forget the essential role of deliberation and judgment and understanding, especially of self-understanding. Sport handled well provides an opportunity to understand the importance of truthfulness about oneself and about one's relationships to others. Self-understanding has largely to do with coming to terms with limits—understanding what I *can* do and what I *can't* do. Ultimately, all true possibility comes from understanding limits, for knowing the limits of what I am capable of means knowing what I am capable of. In an athletic contest, that kind of understanding is essential, from both the technical standpoint of trying to figure out how to beat an opponent and the moral standpoint of trying to figure out what sort of person I am capable of being. I have to know my own strengths and weaknesses to compete well. If I'm a gymnast like Dominique Dawes, I want to develop a floor exercise routine that takes advantage of my explosive athleticism; if I'm more like Shannon

Miller I want to emphasize precision, control, and grace. If I'm a baseball player with no power but good speed, I need to develop my skills as a slap hitter and I'd better be able to lay down a good bunt. If I'm an archer with a tendency to get complacent after shooting three or four good ends, I need to admit that I have this weakness. I might need to develop the habit of telling myself, no matter how good the last end was, that I could shoot a few points higher if I would only bear down harder.

Of course, self-understanding of limits includes the recognition of *apparent* limits, which can lead to one of the most rewarding athletic experiences—overcoming apparent limits. Sometimes young athletes (and old ones) think they are capable of much more than they are; and sometimes they are capable of more—sometimes much more—than they think they are. Knowing which is which is not easy, but it's central to the athletic experience. To bombard young athletes with the fiction that anything is possible if they work hard enough, want it bad enough, or visualize it long enough may sometimes be effective locker-room rhetoric; but the truth can be effective, too. Why not say to a young athlete, when the occasion calls for it, "I'm not going to tell you that anything is possible, because it isn't; but I do think you are capable of much more than you realize"?

Of course, if winning is everything, then there is no room for self-understanding about limits. If winning is everything, then anything is possible. If we lost the game, then we should have done something else to win. But there's a difference between reasonably exhorting young athletes to do more than they think they are capable of and pushing them to cheat, to use steroids, or to psychologically self-destruct. There's a difference, for example, between demanding fitness of a young female gymnast within the limits of her growing body and driving her to anorexic eating habits that will carry over into the rest of her life.

Sportsmanship requires an understanding that all of us are finite human beings with finite strengths, that we are all limited; but at the same time it requires that we understand how athletic competition gives us an opportunity to *excel*, to develop ourselves and in a certain sense to transcend ourselves, to become better. The word "sportsmanship" is shorthand for a whole complex of character traits that athletic competition should instill in our young people; but inextricably bound up with the development of that character is the judgment and the understanding—*seeing the way things are*—that make it possible to exercise that character.

And, perhaps even more importantly, because athletic competition always involves understanding ourselves in relation to others, it provides an arena for the development of judgment about human relations. I must not only know my own strengths and weaknesses,

but my strengths and weaknesses in relation to my opponents' or to my teammates'. I have to pit my abilities against an opponent's in such a way as to gain a relative advantage—and usually that doesn't mean I get the opportunity simply to pit my strength against his or her weakness. My crosscourt forehand may be my strongest shot, but my opponent's may be stronger; even though I'd rather hit my forehand, I may realize that backhand rallies will give me the edge. And, as I seek the advantage that might allow me to win, I have to keep sight of the deeper level at which our competition binds us together. I can come to understand and respect the efforts of others, and I can come to respect and admire the achievements and talents of others. In a team sport, I have to fit my abilities into the web of interrelations that makes up a team. If, for example, I shoot a basketball like I was born with boxing gloves on, I need to set picks for my teammates who can shoot. I have to understand the mystery of the whole becoming greater than the sum of the parts, that, when the team clicks, the individual participants get back more than they put into it.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Apply these reflections about limits and apparent limits to yourself. What are the weaknesses that you need to be aware of? Strengths? Think not just in terms of your technical prowess as a coach, but in terms of moral character.
- There's a saying that "Your greatest strength is your greatest weakness." What does that mean?
- What do you do and say to your players to help them understand their own limits, their own strengths and weaknesses as athletes and as human beings?
- What do you do and say to your players to help them overcome apparent limits?
- Rate yourself on a scale from an overwillingness to accept limits at one extreme to the belief that there are no limits at the other. Remember that we're talking here not about locker-room rhetoric, but about understanding the way things are.
- One of the tag lines in Nike's ad campaign during the Centennial Olympic Games was: "You don't win silver, you lose gold." What are the implications of that sentiment?

SPORT, HUMILITY, AND WISDOM

Athletic achievement is a matter of hard work, determination, practice; but it's also a matter of talent and circumstance, of streaks and inexplicable chemistry and magic moments. Even in a culture that often encourages unabashed self-congratulation and self-adulation, many of our greatest athletes react to their achievements with gestures and remarks of thankfulness, humility, even of a kind of reverence: Bjorn Borg falling to his knees at Wimbledon, Dan Jansen's graceful humility after winning an Olympic gold medal in speed skating, Roger Maris so humbled by hitting his 61st home run that his teammates had to physically shove him back out of the dugout so the fans could cheer him. Some athletes express this experience in religious terms, "thanking God for the opportunity." Whether we understand this experience in religious terms or not, in part we do experience—and we should experience—great talent, a great game or series, a great hitting or shooting streak, the chemistry of a great team, as a "gift," an opportunity that is "given" to us.

Great talents can be squandered or developed; but, in the end, talent is something a person is lucky enough to have, not something that he or she earns. (And, as the behavior of some of the most talented individuals all too clearly reveals, we shouldn't infer from the presence of talent that its possessor deserves to possess it.) Almost paradoxically, the experience of great talent, if we think about it honestly, is an occasion for humility and thankfulness. Hakeem Olajuwon may have worked very hard at what he does so well, but how many seven-footers are born with the foot speed of a sprinter and the quickness of a cutting horse? His talent is a thing of beauty: It's something for us to admire and for him to be proud of, but at the same time it's something for him—and for us—to be thankful for.

One of the consequences of understanding talent as a gift is the recognition that talent carries with it special responsibilities. In the movie *Hoosiers*, when the new basketball coach tells the most talented young athlete in town that he has a gift, he is at the same time exhorting him to develop it, to come to deserve it, to let it contribute. As a rule, the greater the talent, the greater the responsibility. Although sport provides one of the few arenas in which we can openly talk about natural ability, it's worth noting here that this rule is not restricted to the playing field.

Along the same lines, great athletic events and achievements are often experienced as opportunities for which the participants and spectators feel grateful. Ask a great hitter in the middle of a streak (or, maybe better, after it's over) how he experiences his accomplishment.

Years of practice and effort are the prerequisites for a streak, and yet, like a slump, there is a sense in which *it just happens*. And there is a sense in which it can't be forced. Good coaches know the expression (and the right moments to use it) "Let it happen." In *Zen in the Art of Archery,* the German philosopher Eugen Herrigel recounts the six years he spent studying archery with a Zen master in Japan. The discipline and dedication and effort are monumental, but the master tells him that the goal of all this hard work is to get to the point at which "it" will shoot the arrows, not him. The Taoists call this *wu-wei*, letting things happen spontaneously and naturally. After winning the men's individual gold medal in archery in the 1996 Summer Olympics, Justin Huish, a 21-year-old Californian, remarked: "I was in a fog, just trying to see gold in my sight and let it rip."

In *Life on the Run* Bill Bradley describes his love of basketball this way:

> *The money and the championships are reasons I play, but what I'm addicted to are the nights like tonight when something special happens on the court. The experience is one of beautiful isolation. It cannot be deduced from the self-evident, like a philosophical proposition. It cannot be generally agreed upon, like an empirically verifiable fact, and it is far more than a passing emotion. It is as if a lightning bolt strikes, brings insight into an uncharted area of human experience. (pp. 220-221)*

In *A River Runs Through It* Norman Maclean describes the art of casting a fly rod in terms of this same mysterious combination of determined hard work and the humility to let it happen:

> *My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes from art and art does not come easy. (p. 4)*

No work, no grace. But, by the same token, work alone cannot achieve it; it cannot be forced. Maclean puts it this way:

> *Well, until man is redeemed he will always take a fly rod too far back, just as natural man always overswings with an ax or golf club and loses all his power somewhere in the air; only with a rod it's worse, because the fly often comes so far back it gets caught behind in a bush or rock. (p. 3)*

The son of a Presbyterian minister, Maclean chooses to call it "grace"; the Zen master says "it" shoots the arrow, that the release of the arrow is like the snow falling from the end of a bamboo leaf. In American sports lingo, we talk about athletes being "in the zone," "on fire," "shooting lights out," "unconscious." It's that experience of

being present when something wonderful happens. We come to appreciate how much great moments in sport are a gift for which we should be grateful because we've all been in the situation of saying "It just didn't happen for me today," "I just didn't have it today," or "I tried my best, but it wasn't in the cards. . . ." When it does happen for us, it's wise to feel proud of our achievement, but at the same time lucky to be there.

In that sense, the athletic experience goes beyond the development of character and the calculative understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses; it is an opportunity for a kind of wisdom. Although we may not go so far as to endorse the total selflessness of Zen Buddhism, we can say that sport sometimes does provide an experience of a kind of spirituality that transcends the arrogant egoism that characterizes so much of our culture. The experience in sport of great moments and great talent, far from encouraging the arrogant egoism that we see too often on our TVs, is an occasion for a kind of selfless humility. And that experience of selfless humility can be mysteriously enriching.

We can agree with the Zen master that this is the same spirituality that humans have sought in all the activities that can be done either well or poorly, all of the activities that require dedication, hard work, and grace. In giving yourself over to the activity, something happens to you. Great musicians, like great athletes, give themselves over to the music, and the music comes over them. The same could be said of great writers, dancers, cooks, carpenters, and a host of others. By giving themselves over to something, by giving themselves up to the activity, they are enlarged by it.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- What do you do or say to call attention to those aspects of sport that we can't control, to the things that simply happen but can't be made to happen?
- Do you ever refer to talent as a gift?
- Do you use the word "humility"? Do you think of humility as a virtue?
- Do you think that greater talent implies greater responsibility?
- When you talk to your players after a great game or season, which do you tend to emphasize: that they should be proud of their accomplishment or thankful for the opportunity?

WRAP-UP

Why sportsmanship? Because the nature of sport requires it. Sport understood as rule-governed competitive athletic play requires—and therefore can teach—certain character traits. Without sportsmanship, sport is no longer sport, the game is no longer a game. If the game is valuable—if we play the game for its joy, for its educational value, for its intrinsic beauty, for the truth about ourselves that it opens up—then sportsmanship is indispensable.

Why sportsmanship? Because it matters what sort of human beings we are—and what sort of human beings our children become. Because it's better for human beings to be courageous, disciplined, fair, honest, responsible, humble, and wise than not to be. The complex of character traits that we refer to as the virtue of sportsmanship is "useful"—good character helps us to win games, run a business, develop friendships—but we should be careful not to reduce sportsmanship to a mere expediency. Why sportsmanship? Because good character is good for its own sake, whether we are "rewarded" for it or not. Or, in traditional ethical terms, sportsmanship is its own reward.